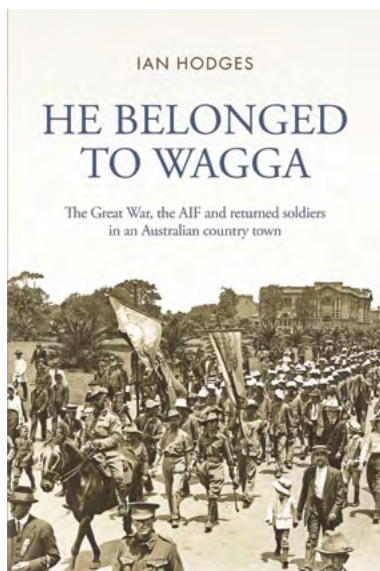


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He Belonged to Wagga: The Great War, the AIF and Returned soldiers in an Australian Country Town

By Ian Hodges

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Reviewed by Katherine Smith

He Belonged to Wagga is a microhistory chronicling the impacts of World War I on the regional town of Wagga Wagga. Through a detailed interrogation of the residents' experiences, particularly the soldiers' recruitment and repatriation, Ian Hodges adeptly disrupts the 'deceptive commonality' (p. 228) of the Anzac experience.

In Chapter 1, Hodges summarises Wagga Wagga's pre-war employment, trade, recreation, health and education. Many residents of this remote regional centre made their living on the land, but many others pursued professional opportunities akin to those available in the city. Indeed, the backgrounds and experiences of the men from the district who would eventually form the ranks of the First Australian Infantry Force (1st AIF) were diverse. Hodges successfully problematises the narrative that 'men from the bush had a natural affinity for soldiering' (p. 8) through this account.

The nature of the war experience itself follows in Chapters 2–6 from recruitment drives and fundraising efforts to supply shortages and conscription referendums. The depth of Hodges' research is evident in his copious use of newspapers, letters, diaries, meeting minutes, war service records and scholarship. He continuously draws on the historical record to elucidate the toll imposed by the war on both public and private life in Wagga.

Chapters 7–11 outline the complex, fraught processes of repatriation and commemoration in Wagga Wagga. These later chapters contain Hodges' most insightful analysis as he works to challenge the archetype of the 'damaged veteran' (p. 226). This is a particularly difficult task given the nature of the historical record. Without attracting the attention of the media or the law, many returned soldiers quickly disappear from view. Hodges laments this absence, noting that 'the experience of many is documented in the cases

of only a few' (p. 210). Close studies of the associations for returned soldiers and the soldier settlement program promote a more nuanced understanding of those Anzacs considered irreparably damaged by their war experience.

Hodges' microhistory would support the effective delivery of the WWI curriculum. Microhistories—detailed case studies of places, people or events that illuminate broader historical continuities and changes—have been steadily growing in popularity in the historiography since the 1970s. In junior years, a microhistory can work particularly well as a starter activity by capturing student attention. This anchoring in a concise narrative can be then used to explore a broader topic or theme. In senior years, the circumscribed nature of a microhistory can be useful for focusing student tasks on historical skill development rather than content memorisation.

He Belonged to Wagga is a penetrable microhistory that is clearly written, effectively illustrated with numerous photographs, and densely referenced. It could be used effectively by both students and teachers in junior and senior History classrooms.

Through his detailed assessment of the multifaceted impacts of WWI on Wagga Wagga and its residents, Hodges successfully conveys the 'more complex and interesting reality' beyond the 'prevailing or one-dimensional views' (p. x) that typify representations of the Anzac experience.